

Photographer and Filmmaker, Willie B. Thomas

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[Rachel Brinton-Mathews]: Well firstly we should start with big congratulations on your new baby. How is everyone doing?

[Willie B. Thomas]: Thanks, we're all good. Everyone's a little bit tired but other than that, it's going well.

[RBM]: That's great to hear. An interesting time in history to be joining the world!

[WBT]: Indeed!

[RBM]: Talking of history, perhaps we can start at the beginning of yours - how did you first get started in photography? Was it something that you knew you wanted to do from when you were very young?

[WBT]: Not really. I wasn't originally into photography, but I've been into art since I was really young. I grew up in New York in the 1960s and at that time, they had all these really great programs for lower-income kids. People noticed that I could actually draw and so I started getting opportunities to join all the different art programs after school.

[RBM]: So, you came in via pen and paper first?

[WBT]: Yes exactly. I went to the High School of Art and Design in New York, which used to be one of the premier art schools in NYC. It was a high school program where they just teach commercial art; from cartooning, fashion illustration, package design, basically everything that has to do with commercial art. It was a way for the city to feed the commercial art market in New York with new talent.

[RBM]: A smart move for NYC! And it must have been amazing to be there at that time. Did you specialize in any specific discipline?

[WBT]: I actually thought I wanted to be a cartoonist at first - in the second year we had to study every discipline which included cartooning to photography. In the end, I didn't find cartooning as interesting as I thought I would. I think the monotony of drawing 25 frames per second animations got to me. And straight after cartooning, I studied photography and all the cute women were in the photography class so...

[RBM]: A well thought out professional decision then?!

[WBT]: Well it turned out really good. My tutors were old commercial photographers from New York who retired their businesses and then started teaching. It was a great grounding and from there I went to the School of Visual Arts, also in New York.

[RBM]: Quite a few prestigious institutions under your belt! Did you feel prepared for a photography career in the real world?

[WBT]: I was also working when I was at SVA. I got a job doing photography for the National Urban

League, which is a civil rights organization dedicated to the economic empowerment of historically underserved urban communities. We were creating content for the government including public service pieces. I remember one was advising communities on the dangers of using skin lightening makeup.

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[RMB]: Wow, stock photography feels like quite a departure from that work. How did that transition happen?

[WBT]: Well before stock, there was the military! I was probably about 22 and I had been involved in the arts since I was 10 years old and I was incredibly bored with it. A friend of mine decided he was going to join the military and I decided to the same. I joined the Air Force and ended up there for 20 years!

[RMB]: Ha, not a quick tour then! Did you take photos while you were there?

[WBT]: I did. The whole time I was in the military I would do my own little photo projects. I got stationed in Germany, and at that time, the US military had these great hobby centers. There was a dark room that nobody used so I would do commercial work there alongside my military work. I had a commercial client that had worked for an advertising agency in Mannheim, Germany, and he would always tell me I should submit my work for stock.

[RMB]: He did a great recruitment job for us! And how was your introduction to the stock world?

[WBT]: When I first went to the iStock website and saw the prices I thought, no way. But the client kept pestering me to do it, so I committed to a year, just to see what would happen. I'd left the military by then, so it was a good time to test it out. At the start I would upload to iStock maybe every month, it was pretty casual. But then my girlfriend at the time (who was much more on top of my accounts than I was!) let me know that my earnings were pretty healthy after six months. She said, "in the first few months you could have afforded a McDonald's dinner from your earnings, but by the second half of the year you could cover your entire rent!" So, she suggested I take it a little bit more seriously.

[RMB]: A lesson in checking one's account regularly?

[WBT]: Yes, understanding how it all works is a big part of it. I used to look at the iStock forums a lot. There would be loads of advice there, other photographers talking about what sells and what doesn't. There were loads of recommendations for shooting people in a really positive way and that was perfect for me as that's exactly what I was doing in the studio at the time.

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[RBM]: Would that be a key bit of advice for anyone starting in stock photography?

[WBT]: Anyone who is thinking about getting into stock photography I would advise to go into forums and stay there a month. Do not upload one image, just stay in the forums and learn. Look at what's going on and what's being critiqued. Look at what people are reporting as their sales and you will get a good idea of what you should focus on.

[RBM]: How do you feel your craft has changed since those early days of forum inspired, studio shoots?

[WBT]: I used to like being fairly close in my compositions. And that was one of the things I had to unlearn as back then I didn't necessarily see all of the information on the edges of the frame as important. I liked to really zoom in tight on the action. But that limits the usefulness for a designer, so I had to learn to back off a little bit but still capture the emotions.

And back in the day, we would just find whatever models were available. But as I shot more and I started thinking about certain topics, I wanted to show more nuanced emotions around the story or situation. I basically like to shoot what I know, my life. So, finding people and stories that represent me is how I cast now.

[RBM]: I think your approach to casting is some of the best in the business. You manage to tell such a wide variety of stories and represent many different communities.

[WBT]: It's a lot of people we know. We know tons of interracial families, queer people, interesting characters. They are our real neighbors and that's the type of people I'm interested in shooting. In my portfolio, the images that sell the best are all neighbors of mine.

I was seeing lots of shiny, posed people in stock but it wasn't my frame of reference. I wanted to look for the people that I see every day.

[RBM]: Where do you find inspiration for your work? How do you stay inspired?

[WBT]: I am influenced by the every day, politics and current affairs. I don't think I look at many photography sources at all anymore. In my recent basketball shoot, I included some Black Lives Matter T-shirts but unfortunately, they weren't legally allowed since they are an organization and would need a property release.

[WBT]: And I still cartoon! I still have a little notepad which I fill up with sketches and sometimes those will spark an idea.

[RBM]: You should add illustration to your account as well and become a triple threat!

[WBT]: Haha, perhaps. It's one of my favorite pastimes. I always come back to it because after spending hours on the computer it's just nice to sit down and do something by hand.

I'm also inspired by people, I'm always people watching and thinking "what's their story?"

[RBM]: Storytelling is so important and something we're hearing our customers request more and more. You are particularly good at creating stories in your shoots. Do you think that comes from your cartooning days and building narrative from those 25 frames per second illustrations?

[WBT]: Yes, for sure. For me, it's always about the story. They can be simple stories, for the basketball shoot we built the idea around people meeting on an inner-city basketball court. They challenge each

other to one on ones and there's our story.

[RBM]: And what about with video? Are you able to take your storytelling even further with this medium?

[WBT]: Yes definitely. Video offers so much more opportunity for narrative development. I just can't shoot video and stills at the same time! But I enjoy it when I can just concentrate on video. We actually recently shot a short art film that got picked up by the Berlin Film Festival.

[RBM]: Amazing, congratulations! To wrap up, what would be your one piece of advice for any young creators just starting out?

[WBT]: Start with the story. Find stories that you can tell, and that are interesting to you. Get really good at the technical side. My training in photography at the School of Art Design was excellent. Commercial photography in New York is a cutthroat game so they really prepared us for that. You have to be at your peak all of the time. I often suggest to young photographers who come to me for advice that they forget they have a 64-gigabyte card. Imagine you have 36 exposures, that's it. This will slow you down and make you think about what you're doing.